From a Pub Game to a Sporting Spectacle: The professionalisation of British Darts, 1970 – 1997

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Abstract: Various sport scholars have noted the transition of sports from amateur leisure pastimes to professionalised and globalised media sporting spectacles. Recent developments in darts offer an excellent example of these changes, yet the sport is rarely discussed in contemporary sports studies. The only sustained theoretical research on darts focuses primarily on the origins of the sport in its nostalgic form as a working-class, pub taproom pastime in England.

This article critically examines the transformation of darts from a leisurely game to a professional sport between the 1970s and the 1990s. The change was enabled by the creation of the British Darts Organisation (BDO) and the introduction of television broadcasting, which together fed a continual process of professionalisation. Initially, this article discusses both the concept of professionalisation and similar developmental changes in a selection of English sports. Following this, via selected interviews, documentary analysis and archival information, the reasons behind the split in darts are explicated, shedding light on how the BDO did not successfully manage the transformation and the sport split into two governing bodies, from which the Professional Darts Corporation (PDC), the sport's most successful organisation in the present day, has emerged to dominate the world of televised darts.

Keywords: Darts, professionalisation, television, game, sport

Introduction

For much of the twentieth century, darts was a predominantly working-class game played by local people and top-ranked players in British pubs and social clubs. However, since the 1970s, the game has rapidly changed from a communal game into a sporting entertainment spectacle. This has occurred through two processes: a primary transformation under the auspices of the British Darts Organisation (BDO) from the 1970s until the early 1990s, and a secondary metamorphosis under the governance of the Professional Darts Corporation (PDC) from the late 1990s until the present day. Darts is now played by elite players and watched by a diverse audience in a carnivalesque atmosphere at 'live' venues and broadcast to television audiences worldwide under the auspices of the PDC (led by Barry Hearn and Matchroom Sport since the early 2000s). However, what is less known is how professional darts got to this stage. The focus of this article is to provide a historical analysis of the transformation of darts between 1970 to 1997, prior to the final formation of the PDC following the Tomlin Order in June 1997. This period involved the introduction of television showcasing the game and the creation of the BDO through a process of professionalisation in the 1980s and 1990s.

Discussions regarding the transformation of a wide variety of English sports in the late twentieth century have been explored in depth (to name a few): Harriss focused on cricket and the influence of Kerry Packer globally in the late twentieth century;[1] scholars including Denham focused the transformation of rugby league in England in the 1990s;[2] Redhead was one of many scholars who analysed the transformation of English football in the 1990s;[3] Harris analysed the change and globalisation of rugby union in the 1990s.[4] Many of these sports will be discussed within a specific section of this article outlining the transformation of other English sports in this period. However, darts has rarely been discussed in sport or historical studies research: Chaplin concluded that there is much more to discover concerning darts post-1945.[5] This article can be considered a response to Jennings' invocation that anyone who wants to know about the significance of change in darts would wish for more on its late-twentieth century development.[6] The only available sources with any sustained information regarding the development of darts in the late twentieth century are found within a variety of newspaper reports on darts, televisual documentaries and material on darts (most notably from the British Broadcasting

Corporation, known as the BBC and Westward TV), which are not wholly relevant to the discussions in this article, aside from the BBC's documentary on the split in darts (which is discussed in depth later in this article) and a range of autobiographical accounts, one of which was reviewed by Victoria Dawson.[7]

The autobiographical accounts were produced by a variety of darts players and personnel involved in elite darts between 1970 and 1997, many of which helped to formulate the basis of this article. It is understood that narratives found within autobiographies are sometimes secondary interviews and interpretations of the past. According to Power et. al, autobiographical accounts are a rich reservoir of qualitative data and provide a valuable source of vicarious experience.[8] The researcher was sensitive to the fact that autobiographies and documentaries are used to sell and are not always 100% true, so the books were utilised with caution and not held as universal truths. However, they were too valuable not to be used to offer contextual support, as autobiographies can provide an insightful account of an individual's sporting experiences, and give understanding into differing areas.[9] With such little theoretical data in the field regarding darts, these became vital accounts linked to the key themes of the overall article.

As stated previously, although there has been little discussion regarding the development of the game and sport of darts post World War Two, it is widely recognised amongst darts fans that, following the work of the Professional Darts Players Association (PDPA) in the late 1980s, the introduction of the WDC in January 1992 (as the World Darts Council, named the PDC in 1997) marked a dramatic change in the game. This article examines the period directly before the rise of the PDC, when the BDO was in charge, and analyses the reasons why there was the need for two governing bodies by the end of the 1990s for the sport of darts to progress. The first section of this article outlines the origins of darts and the development in the early twentieth century: more in-depth information on the origins and development of darts in the UK pre-1970 can be found within Chaplin's extensive historical account of darts in England.[10] In the second section, the concept of professionalisation is outlined: following this, a decade by decade exploration of the modernisation and transformation of professional darts is analysed, culminating in the 1990s *split in darts*, at which point the article explores the reasons why the

'split' occurred and analyses the key factors that led to the official formation of the World Darts Council in January 1992, which was renamed the Professional Darts Corporation (PDC) following a Tomlin Order in June 1997.[a] The future of darts approaching the twenty-first century is discussed, detailing how the continued professionalisation of the two governing bodies (BDO and PDC) succeeded in gaining darts its official accreditation as a sport in 2005.

Considerations of the transformation of other English sports and the changes in society in the late twentieth century

As stated within the introductory section of this article, the study of a sport transforming from a casual, unstructured pastime to a regulated contemporary sport has been explored by sport historians and sociologists over several years. Scholars have outlined that when a game turns into a sport, it takes on a different form of social process in how it is played and consumed, progressing from a leisurely pastime to a structured physical activity. The aim of this article is to provide an analysis of the transformation of darts as a game to a sport, and understand how this occurred via an ongoing process of professionalisation.

It is worth noting at this juncture that the changes in darts that developed within this period reflected changes in a number of other British sports. The following stand out: most notably, transformations within association football in the late twentieth century which have been explored in a range of studies from the likes of Critcher[11] and Taylor[12], through to the likes of Redhead[13], Brown[14], Giulianotti[15] and Duke[16] who noted the changes in association football following the Taylor Report in 1990 and the advent of the Premier League in 1992. In Rugby League, scholars including the likes of Collins[17], Denham[18], and Spracklen[19] have discussed the transformations in the northern hemisphere element of the sport following the BskyB deal in 1995; within Rugby Union, a range of scholars such as Phillpots [20]; Dunning & Sheard[21]; Collins[22]; Harris[23] and Rayner[24] have focused on the changes in the sport post

[a] A Tomlin order is a court order in the English civil justice system under which a court action is stayed, on terms which have been agreed in advance between the parties and which are included in a schedule to the order. The Tomlin order established the freedom of darts players to ply their trade in the PDC without being banned from all BDO-sanctioned darts.

the switch from amateur to professionalism in 1995. A range of scholars have explored the sport of snooker with the likes of Burn[25], Hargreaves[26], Shibli and Coleman[27], Boyle and Haynes[28], and Hitchcock[29] analysing different elements of the sport and its progression in the late twentieth century. In regards to the sport of Boxing, Donnelly[30], and mostly notably, Sheard[31] utilises Elias's civilizing process when focusing on the development of boxing into a sport from its earlier origins of prize fighting which exuded barbarity and could cause brain damage: however the civilizing processes of Boxing helped to introduce changes as it became a sport to make it more regulated but even more dangerous as an activity. In Tennis, the likes of Lake[32], and notably in regards to this article, Cooper [33] examines the development of lawn tennis and some of the reasons for its rapid rise in popularity, and that lawn tennis developed as a result of the interweaving of a number of complex social processes.

There is not the scope to discuss the transformations of these in these sports in any detail within this article other than to make the general but important point that the changes involved were reflected in the restructuring of global capitalism which had its roots in the social, political, economic and ideological contradictions that were at work in western democracies at the end of the 1960s and early 1970s. As Blackshaw explains:

> Between the end of the Second World War and the start of the 1970s the reach of the market extended to such a degree that Western democracies were fundamentally transformed. They changed so rapidly and radically that it can be reasonably interpreted that by the onset of the 1980s the *longue durée* of modernity had entered a new conjuncture in which the contradictions underpinning social class inequality revealed during the Industrial Revolution moved decisively away from a specific and distinctive producer 'heavy' and 'solid', 'hardware-focused' shape to take the form of a more uncertain but distinctively consumer 'light' and a 'liquid', 'soft-ware-focused' one. If solid modernity was one of the rationalization of objects (and human subjects) through standardization, abstraction and Fordist mass production, Bauman asserts, the liquid modernity that superseded it was one of rationalization through cultural difference, reflexive individualization and consumerism. [34]

To borrow Bauman's terminology, these contradictions came together to give society a new specific and distinctive liquid shape which saw solid working class identities transformed and production-based masculinity giving way to consumer masculinities.[35] What this meant was that the tacit conventions underpinning sports such as modern darts (which had emerged under the auspices of 'standardization, abstraction and Fordist mass production') started to be undermined, leading to the development of a

contradictory situation in which hegemonic masculinity is both celebrated and vilified, but nevertheless exploited by the market.

The origins of darts and place in British gaming culture

To understand the progression and impact of professionalisation on darts, the origins of darts must be explored to form an understanding of how the sport has progressed. This is important since it allows the author to contextualise the professionalisation of darts historically. Chaplin extensively researched the social history of darts from the beginning of the twentieth century through to the interwar years (1900 - 1939). Chaplin's analysis of the modern form of darts highlights how the game popularised itself in the United Kingdom (specifically in England). However, it would be naive to assume that darts was a traditional English game: the origins of darts are contested themselves, with Irwin amongst others believing that darts 'has its origins in the middle ages' when 'Anne Boleyn presented King Henry VIII with a set of darts'.[36] Chaplin believes that 'the assumption of Darts being a sport made by the English was first challenged in 1985 by Francoise Ollivier' and has links to target based sports in a range of cultures around the world in previous centuries.[37] Chaplin stated that the birthplace of darts was found in France, outlining how that the origins of the modern game lay 'principally in the importance of wooden French Darts', initially in the form of a sport called *Javelot*, and more specifically in a scaled down version of Javelot called *Flechettes*, which was and still is a popular pastime in 'the regions of Nord Pas-De-Calais and Picardy'.[38] In literal translation, 'Flechette' means small arrow. The target and aim of Flechettes is a miniature concentric archery target. Here Chaplin makes the link to forms of archery, which he discusses into some depth. He then links this to the English game of 'Puff and Dart', which amalgamated with Flechettes to form the basics of the dartboard and targets we see in modern darts.

For the purposes of this article, it is clear that darts emerged in working-class localities as a key aspect of working-class culture. Waddell associates the game of darts principally with the English working-class culture, and this is how it is conveyed to the viewer in the present day.[39] Historically, the public house, or 'pub' has been identified as a nationally significant building typology that has played a

significant role in shaping English and British national identity as a whole.[40] It is known as a place where people drink, where gambling occurs, and where people played games such as dominoes and darts - it was (and is) seen as a place of community and locality. Focusing on darts, the pub was the birthplace and epicentre of the game of darts as a local pastime in the United Kingdom in the late 1800s and early 1900s: Norridge states that the game of darts began to appear in pubs in the 1890s.[41] Historically, in terms of governance and professional league formation, alcohol, and brewery companies, have been at the epicentre of darts throughout its history. Chaplin analyses the links between breweries and darts extensively in his publication,[42] initially stating how brewers have 'always had strong links with sport' and that the brewing industry embraced sport as a way of improving the public house to support change for their longer term future and benefit.[43] Eventually, brewers saw sport as a profitable leisure form and using darts, formed brewery leagues which they saw as profitable, organised pub recreation, and in 1924/1925, as Chaplin identifies - 'the brewery announced the formation of a Barclay's Darts League', which consisted of working-class players in teams across London in five divisions.[b44]

As a game, darts was played in a variety of forms across the country of England before the proliferation of London 'treble' dartboards in the 1920s which 'usurped regional boards' according to Taylor.[45] This change occurred with the newly-formed National Darts Association (NDA) in 1924: the NDA was the first national governing body for Darts, and tried to standardise the game across England from their London base, encouraging the coherence that ultimately gave rise to the nationwide tournaments that emerged out of such uniformity. These changes led to darts being regulated in some formats, hence the game's initial progression towards becoming a sport. Chaplin alludes to the ideals of the game of darts being essentially a male, working-class activity within the alehouses in the formative years of the sport, and how the link between the pub and game of darts were fused almost immediately, stating that darts was 'all that is synonymous with the English working-class generally and specifically the working-class pubgoer'.[46] The essential infrastructure of darts, dartboards and rules were set up in the interwar period

[b] The inaugural Barclay's Darts League commenced in early 1925, consisting of 56 darts teams across London in five divisions. Barclay Perkins sponsored the prizes and trophies for the winning teams, but the responsibility for the organisation lay with the licensees.

of governance by the NDA, with Chaplin explaining the specific role of the NDA and how they helped darts develop in this period with a darts 'craze' occurring across the country in the 1930s.[47] According to Chaplin, darts had become the most popular pub sport in the interwar period, now being 'a game already popular with hundreds of thousands of pubgoers by the beginning of the decade also became a dominant part of popular culture of the English middle and upper classes by the middle of the 1930s'.[48] He explains how the game of darts was marketed by the NDA working with both the brewers and licensees as counter-attraction to the other rising alternative leisure opportunities such as the cinema and dance halls and so knew their demographic age group, and sex that they wanted to target.

Darts, which was once a key part of working class culture, appeared to be emerging in this period as 'a craze' or part of what Hoggart describes as the 'new shiny barbarism'.[49] Darts, as a game, was becoming separated from its origins, lifted from its working-class roots and became a sport to be consumed. We see the beginnings of mass popular culture when things start to become 'crazes', as Hoggart argues. One cannot underestimate the extent to which being involved in pub games such as darts gave people autonomy, control over their own lives, organisational skills - a factor critiqued by Bishop and Hoggett.[50] Bishop and Hoggett state that 'the scale of leisure activities in which people engage in their spare time such as Whippet racing, Shove-ha' Penny, Pigeon Fancying/Racing' and identify darts in the same category when tabulating many various forms of leisure.[51] Darts could be seen as a game within the same category as the aforementioned working-class pursuits in which people had some say in their lives.

It is clear that the professionalisation of darts was not a process that began overnight. The first signs of the professionalisation were evident during what Chaplin described as a 'craze' in the 1930s, and acknowledges this period as the first 'boom' in the game. *Darts World* described Harold Barker as the first professional darts player in England and 'the first of a new breed of professional-cum-exhibition darts players'.[52] Chaplin describes Barker's darting exploits in the 1920s and 1930s in great depth and explains how Barker developed from a working-class Bradford background to become one of darts first heroes.[53] However, Chaplin asserts that 'the first full-time professional darts players would not emerge until the 1970s'.[54] This article aims to provide an understanding/analysis as to why and how this

occurred, in the specific time period Chaplin highlighted (the 1970s onwards). Governance in darts was critical to its late twentieth century development, and the focal point in terms of the professionalisation of the game.

Following the Second World War, many allied soldiers took the game of darts back to their countries to showcase a popular local game. In the UK, between September 1954 until the 1970s, darts was controlled by the National Darts Association Great Britain (NDAGB), which was formed after the Second World War. This was a different organisation to the NDA of the interwar years. The NDAGB was an organisation formed by *The People* newspaper and London-based darts organisers on a pyramidal basis – with the county associations at the base of the structure, regional areas in the middle, and the executive council at the apex.[55] During the NDAGB's period of control, darts remained a low-profile pub game with little or no national significance in terms of media coverage, except for the *News of the World* individual championship, first held in 1928 and the *People* team competition formed and first held in 1938.[c56] Chaplin argues that mid-twentieth century darts helped to revive the sense of community of the public house and strengthened it against threats from continually expanding leisure forms, particularly the medium of the television in the 1950s and 1960s. The first major changes post war in the game of darts took place in the 1970s and early 1980s, and as the latter sections of this article will demonstrate, would prove to be integral to the emergence of darts as a globalising sport in the present day.

Professionalisation and Darts

This article utilises the concept of professionalisation to explain the historical development of darts in the late twentieth century. However, before discussing the professionalisation of darts in the late twentieth century, one must provide a theoretical understanding of the concept of professionalisation, which will show the processes that darts, alongside the range of British sports stated in the previous section, used the concept to advance their product in the latter half of the twentieth century. Many

[c] The News of the World Individual Darts Championship Finals was first held at Holborn Hall in London in 1928. Patrick Chaplin explains how the championship helped to popularise darts in his publication (Chaplin, 2009, 118 -119).

scholars have offered varied explanations of professionalism and professionalisation and the differences between the two concepts: rather than defining the terms, this section will explore the complexities of the concepts and explain which aspects of professionalisation this article will base its arguments upon.

Friedson, a noted scholar on professionalism (and professionalisation), suggests that 'much of the debate about professionalism is clouded by unstated assumptions and inconsistent and incomplete usages'.[57] Hoyle defined professionalism as 'those strategies and rhetorics employed by members of an occupation in seeking to improve status, salary and conditions'.[58] However, it appears that Hoyle has changed stance on his understanding of the concept in the twenty-first century, explaining the concept being a term used 'to describe enhancement of the quality of service'.[59] Hargreaves and Goodson refer to the lack of consensus relating to the meaning of professionalism;[60] for Troman, professionalism not as an absolute or an ideal, but is 'a socially constructed, contextually variable and contested concept…defined by management and expressed in its expectations of workers and the stipulation of tasks they will perform'.[61] It is clear that professionalism is a variable concept in terms of its actual meaning and the context in which it is used.

Similarly, definitions of the term professionalisation have not been tied to a unified explanation because the meaning of the concept of profession has eluded scholars.[62] In its simplest form, Vollmer and Mills suggest that professionalisation is a process with a predictable sequence in the way in which occupations assume the attributes of a profession.[63] Friedson believed that professionalisation was the social process by which any trade or occupation transforms itself into a true 'profession of the highest integrity and competence'.[64] It is clear that professionalisation is not a new concept: Beech and Chadwick highlight that the professionalisation of a sport and the appearance of 'money-earning players – became an issue in many sports in the late Victorian era'.[65] However, this article will provide an explanation of how darts' professionalisation as a sport occurred almost 100 years later than this period. Dowling et. al explored the meaning of the term professionalisation in further depth, outlining that it has been discussed within sociology and management disciplines for over 80 years.[66] However, they stress that the concept has only been discussed within the field of sport management since the late 1980s and early 1990s.[67]

From a sporting perspective, Beech and Chadwick define professionalisation as the time when 'elite players are able to play sport as a full-time job'.[68] Shilbury and Ferkins refer to professionalisation as the transition from an amateur, volunteer-driven pastime to a more business-like sector.[69] Dowling et. al state that professionalisation is understood to be the process through which occupations change to obtain a professional status, and offer their own definition of the term professionalisation as 'the process by which sport organisations, systems, and the occupation of sport, transforms from a volunteer driven to an increasingly business-like phenomenon'.[70] Shilbury and Ferkins believe that professionalisation seems to be an appropriate strategy for sports organisations to meet organisational pressure due to challenges of a more complex and dynamic changing environment. However, research into the professionalisation of sports organisations has focused on the non-for-profit sector in sporting federation governance. Dowling et. al also outline that their analysis of professionalisation primarily focuses on the professionalisation of amateur sport, and does not examine the literature surrounding professional sport leagues because the current professionalisation literature examines the non-for-profit sector. They highlight that 'the analysis of professionalisation in the professional sporting sector would require further consideration of its unique characteristics'.[71]

Dowling et. al conclude that the study of the concept of professionalisation remains a rich, exciting, and relevant area of research within sport studies with potential that has yet to be fully realised.[72] It is clear that 'professionalisation' is a contested concept, and can be judged in a variety of ways. Many sport scholars have discussed the concept of professionalisation in a very simplistic sense: Wigglesworth used the term professionalisation to be simply about sportsmen getting paid, however, professionalisation is a larger part of the process of modernization in society and sport which accompanies modernization.[73] Though Elias and Weber are seen as the preeminent scholars in terms of the development of modern sports, Giulianotti goes into great depth on both theorists in his earlier work,[74] highlighting how both Elias and Weber's approaches to the sociological understanding of sport have limitations, and that interpretive standpoints would help to explain athlete socialization and the stages of identity construction when participating in sporting subcultures.[75] This is evident in darts in both athlete formations and fan cultures in the sport in the present day.[76]

From this analysis, it is evident that 'professionalism' and 'professionalisation' are two quite distinct concepts: the former denotes a form of attitudes and behaviour in one's approach to work and a working role, whereas the latter denotes an institutional process that formalises a particular structure of income generation, remuneration and structure of work. The purpose of this article is not a discussion of the concept of professionalism or professionalisation, but how a process of professionalisation was one of the key driving factors in the development and transformation of darts from a game to a sport in the late twentieth century. The article will analyse the unique characteristics of darts, the governance of the BDO and the governing body's use of television broadcasting in the 1970s and 1980s and how this governance led to its downfall during its transformation to a sport in the late twentieth century. This will help provide a distinctive analysis of professionalisation in the professional sporting sector, and unearth some of the reasons why the PDC was fully formed in the late 1990s to help continue the progression and growth of darts as a professional sport.

The 1970s: The changing face of darts

Chaplin believes that even with the backing of the UK newspaper the *News of the World* for the *News of the World Championship* throughout the first half of the twentieth century, darts did not truly become 'a national game until the 1970s'.[77] With the introduction of the colour television in 1968, traditional pub games such as darts and snooker had a platform on which to promote and develop their product. The landscape of the darts world began to change irreversibly in the 1970s through a process of professionalisation, which brought darts into the wider sporting stratosphere. Chaplin believes that in the 1970s, **'**the second boom in darts had arrived, but it was different from the interwar obsession with the sport'.[78]

Horne is one of many scholars who believe that the medium of the television has helped to transform the nature, scale and interest in a range of major sporting events, and this was certainly the case for darts.[79] The decade of the 1970s was when the television became one of the primary catalysts for the boom in darts in the UK and was key to the growth and success of the sport. Darts was first broadcast on television in 1936 [80] – however, it is recognised that 1962 was the first year in which the Westward

Television Company regionally screened the 'Westward Invitational', but darts remained a sport screened very sparingly throughout the 1960s. It was in the 1970s where the first decade in which many darts tournaments were televised and gained true national exposure. This began in 1972 when ITV began to broadcast the *News of the World Championship* – the same championship that began in 1927 and its format continued to be players representing their pub against players from other pubs to win the tournament. Chaplin asserts that raising the profile of darts to a national obsession in Britain created the first darts professional, many of whom, including Eric Bristow, John Lowe, Leighton Rees (Wales) and Jocky Wilson (Scotland), became household names.[81] Five-time world champion Bristow, a leading figure from the growth of top-level darts in the 1970s to the late 1990s said that 'the inspiration for darts becoming huge on the box, the bridge to success as it were, had to be *The Indoor League'*.[82]

ITV (Yorkshire Television) commenced the broadcasting of *The Indoor League* in 1972, a programme that was analysed in detail by Waddell and Meade.[83] The *Indoor League* had a specifically northern, working-class focus, and championed pub 'sports' such as shove ha'penny, billiards, skittles, arm wrestling and darts. Each of the games were played by local working-class people, and the darts players were known as local legends or emerging talents from the pub based leagues in certain areas of England. The programme was produced by 'Geordie' and Cambridge University graduate Sid Waddell, and presented by the Yorkshire and England cricketing legend, Fred Trueman, who anchored the programme with a pipe in hand and pint of bitter in tow, using Yorkshire phrases and slang throughout the show. On *The Indoor League*, darts' working-class origins were being actively utilised by television broadcasters to promote and connect the game to a mass TV audience. Waddell stated that television critics were left amazed that over three million viewers would watch a show described by critic Stanley Reynolds as 'having the recherché values of *It's a Knockout* and the heady atmosphere of floodlit Rugby League'.[84] However, Waddell and the producers were happy with this analogy, with Waddell stating that 'the massive pool of working-class viewers was exactly what we were aiming at'.[85] By 1975, *The Indoor League* was achieving broadcasting figures of nearly eight million viewers. Many of the aspects of the early televised darts games in the 1970s embraced the roots of the game which were located in working-class culture of the interwar years: the key signifiers such as drinking and smoking. These

attributes were also reflected in the sponsorship of the game which targeted a working-class consumers and especially men. Clearly both snooker and darts were perceived by the sponsors to have an appeal to working-class identity. This was evident when the BDO World Professional Darts Championship was sponsored by Embassy Cigarettes, a sub-brand of Imperial Tobacco, who would also sponsor the championships (and the Snooker World Championships) for the over 25 years, playing a key role in the game throughout the 1980s.

The other key element to the professionalisation of darts from the 1970s was the formation of the British Darts Organisation (BDO), spearheaded by Olly Croft in January 1973. The BDO set the rules which still govern the game of darts, in conjunction with the World Darts Federation (WDF), who set the distance of the throwing 'oche' (2.37m = 7ft 9 ¼ inches) between the player and the dartboard, and the height and dimensions of the dartboard in 1977.[86] This was the first period in which professionalisation (linked to Shilbury and Ferkins' definition) began to occur: through the BDO's governance, Croft found himself in charge of a multi-million-pound game within less than ten years with a wide variety of darts tournaments broadcast on television networks in the United Kingdom and Europe by the early 1980s. Darts became ingrained in the social consciousness of the larger British public in the mid-1970s through programmes such as *The World of Sport*, which was the ITV's Saturday afternoon sports anthology show and response to the BBC's *Grandstand*. ITV would go on to regularly broadcast many darts tournaments featured throughout the calendar, including the World Masters, British Matchplay, the World Matchplay, the World Cup and other International competitions. The crowning tournament, was the BDO Embassy World Professional Darts Championship, broadcast on the BBC.

The BDO Embassy World Professional Darts Championship was created in 1977 and began in 1978, conceived in a barber shop by sports PR man Mike Watterson as a concept akin to the World Snooker Championship. Waddell stated that the idea for the first darts World Championship was suggested by the players, most notably John Lowe, who managed to persuade Watterson, who had worked closely with Nick Hunter (one of the executive producers for the snooker at the BBC), that a World Championships could work.[87] The players suggested that the championship should be in a similar format to the Snooker World Championship, which was broadcast for the first time in 1977. Imperial

Tobacco, who sponsored the snooker, 'jumped at the chance to come onboard' according to Waddell.[88] Boyle and Haynes stated that snooker was an example of a sport that 'demonstrates the extent to which television exposure can transform a sport from a pastime into a global sports business'.[89] This was also true of darts - snooker had a similar rise in popularity in the 1970s due to the inception of colour television and the exposure it conveyed to the nation, and the rise of characters such as the 1972 and 1982 World Snooker Champion Alex 'Hurricane' Higgins, six time champion Ray Reardon and pint-drinking Bill Werbeniuk. Darts would soon follow this template in the 1980s with characters such as Eric 'The Crafty Cockney' Bristow and Bobby 'The King of Bling' George.

The direct comparison between the professionalisation of snooker and darts is evident because the producer, Nick Hunter, was also the producer for the darts competitions that were broadcast at the time, namely the BDO Embassy World Professional Darts Championship, which was broadcast on the BBC. Boyle and Haynes believe that 'Hunter and his team transformed the television coverage of the game' and that Hunter 'recognised that sport was about drama and people and wanted to amplify the characters playing the game'.[90] This was also key for darts, in more ways than one: Bobby George stated that there were so many different characters in the game of darts at the time that every fan could have their own favourite.[91] Waddell stated that Hunter believed that darts was 'exactly like snooker: they're both sport in miniature'. [92] Both Darts and Snooker were 'go-to' sports at the time because, from the BBC's perspective, they were relatively easy and economical to broadcast compared to other sports, which were much more expensive in terms of outside broadcast such as Football and both codes in Rugby. However, there was (and is) one significant difference between darts and snooker: snooker requires a notion of silence, and applause is only fleeting during a match. The etiquette of snooker is that the commentators are supposed to be reserved to let the players concentrate in a silent arena. Waddell, as the producer of *The Indoor League*, was given the reigns of BBC's televised darts commentary from 1977 and was loud, brash, and spoke with eloquent but animated vigour as the drama reached its climax. Waddell said the atmosphere at the darts on the BBC was super-charged, and that his commentary fed off the atmosphere of the fans in the audience at the world championships. He linked the atmosphere at the world championships to the *Indoor League* events, believing that his bragging to the producers

about the drama of the game, the colour and the 'macho' behaviour he had seen at the other darts events, was being proved right through the televisual lens.[93]

The technological advances in television in the 1970s, allayed with Hunter's direction, which introduced the close-ups of the dartboard, the ground-breaking split screen shot with half of the screen showing the throwing dart player and half of the screen displaying the dartboard, and close ups of the emotion and anxiety in a players' face when nearing a finish, were key in attracting wider audiences. Kennedy and Hills confirm this when stating that 'the prevalence of the close-up in some televised sport might be viewed as a strategy to attract a wider audience'.[94] Though not a new piece of televised angling, the close-up and emotions displayed by both the players and commentators gave more significance to the audience at home watching on television, who wanted to 'feel' closer to the action.[95] The television exposure also had a major impact upon the regulated changes in the sport regarding the legs and sets (a leg being one round of 501, and a player been required to win three legs to win a set: usually a best-of-five legs format constituting to being a set). This format was introduced in 1979, the Championship's second year, and was an indicator of the BDO's aim to appeal to the masses rather than the minority. The change from the matchplay format to sets and legs were purely for drama and spectacle purposes - there would be a climax for television every five to twenty minutes, keeping the viewing audience at home transfixed. This is where Waddell's superlative use of vocabulary became a key component in building the concept of the darting spectacle, as Kennedy and Hills state 'a yell from the commentator immediately refocuses your attention'.[96] Waddell was a master of this, which Altman calls 'italicizing'.[97]

Whilst darts leagues were formed in the 1920s and 1930s, these only gave the game format in regional territories, and did not have the medium of television to globalize their appeal. Television was *the* key to the initial progression of darts in the 1970s (and early 1980s) as viewing figures attracted more revenue and sponsorship to the game. This enabled some of the elite players to become professional. What had started at the *Indoor League* in the early 1970s had become a regulated game with a plethora of tournaments, played out by emerging full-time professionals for large winnings by the close of the 1970s. In January 1979, approximately 8 million BBC viewers watched England's John Lowe beat the

1978 champion, Welshman Leighton Rees 5-0 in the final of the BDO Embassy World Professional Darts Championship.[98] Within barely 10 years, darts had the sponsors and huge television coverage many sports craved.

The 1980s: The boom and bust in darts

By 1980, darts fever had gripped Great Britain. Bobby George, the BDO Embassy World Professional Darts Championship finalist in 1980 and 1994, contends that the 1980 final between himself and Eric Bristow 'changed darts'. George believes that the razzmatazz and showmanship seen in darts in the present day arrived when he played Eric Bristow in the 1980 final, and signified the beginning of the game's heyday.[99] According to George, in the early 1980s TV coverage was at an all-time high and big-money tournaments were coming out of the BDO's 'Mickey Mouse ears'.[100] Bristow supports this claim when stating that throughout the 1980s there were approximately sixteen darts tournaments on terrestrial TV.[101] It was clear that darts was big business, yet it depended on the ongoing support of the television companies to maintain its high profile. The emergence of darts into British mainstream culture was embodied with the introduction of the TV programme *Bullseye.* First broadcast in 1981, *Bullseye* was a gameshow programme that fused popular culture with sport. Hosted by the affable Lancastrian Jim Bowen, assisted by his cartoon sidekick 'Bully', *Bullseye* had the working-class elements that had remained within darts culture from its origins and throughout the 1970s, even after the introduction of the tournament television coverage. In *Bullseye*, there were two contestants per team; one contestant answered questions whilst the other threw darts to score as high as they could to win the leg: the darts players were not professional but ordinary pub players or good super league players. The professional players entered in a segment after the commercial break where a guest professional would try and score 301 or more in nine darts to win the value of the score for a charity nominated by the contestants.[102] One of the team of contestants would ultimately try and win nominal cash prizes and consumer goods of economical usage, such as dishwashers or washing machines, to aim for the 'star prize' of a caravan or a speedboat. This fusion of general knowledge mixed with sport (a concept which would be utilised later by snooker producers for a similar television programme called *Big Break)* was a huge favourite with the masses and was introduced at the peak of darts popularity; with over 17 million

viewers in 1982.[103] These figures confirmed that darts was a sport for the masses, yet the show embodied the origins of the working-class game (even through the prizes on offer), and tried to convey the image that the professionals were still 'one of the people', and could still unite with this class culture effortlessly.

In the early 1980s, darts players were allowed to drink alcohol and smoke cigarettes on the stage during matches, which was a clear reflection of the game's working-class roots in British pubs. However, George noticed that in the British media, darts players were beginning to be criticized for being 'pot-bellied', 'beer-swilling' and 'unhealthy slobs'.[104] The players were famously mocked in a *Not the Nine O'Clock News* sketch featuring comedian Mel Smith, known in the sketch as Tommy 'even-fatter-belly' Belcher. Rather than throwing a dart at the dartboard, Belcher would mimic the throwing action, but instead of drawing a dart he would pick up an alcoholic drink and copiously drink from the glass, whilst spilling the contents all over his shirt. Following the boom in popularity, by the mid-1980s, there were over 20 darts tournaments broadcast on television. Three-time world champion John Lowe stated that by the mid-1980s, darts tournaments began to disappear from the British TV screens, with TV bosses claiming that there were too many events, and that they had all become so similar that the public did not know which event they were watching.[105] The boom was turning to bust: TV companies wanted to wash their hands of what the BBC called its 'five pints a night superstars'.[106] By 1988, from the heady days of over 20 tournaments being broadcast, the number of tournaments televised had been reduced to one: the BDO Embassy World Professional Darts Championship, which was still shown on the BBC: their rival channel, ITV, had axed all of its darts coverage. Some of the top players had become full-time professionals during the peak years in the early 1980s, leaving jobs to pursue darts as a career, so the significant drop in the amount of darts television coverage by 1988 left them with very little prize money to contest. The 1983 World Champion Keith Deller described this time period and its impact on him:

> When the BDO was in charge, there were only 8-10 professionals who were earning a living from playing darts. For example, Alan Warriner, who was deemed a pro, was still a full-time nurse. We used to have around 15 tournaments on TV: this then went down to 3 very quickly. All of a sudden, I went from 80 shows at the breweries per year to 40. The lack of exposure was hurting our contracts – my three-year sponsorship

> deal with Unicorn was under threat when the televised tournaments began to disappear. My livelihood was playing darts - if I'm not on TV, people then don't book me. So that then was going to jeopardise my living as a professional darts player.[107]

According to Bristow, for the players who were emerging and trying to become full-time professionals the lack of exposure represented a major problem. The TV money had gone and darts players were struggling financially, to the extent that some of the top-ten players had to get part-time jobs to make ends meet.[108] It was clear that darts had full-time professionals, and the concept of professionalisation had been embraced, but was being mismanaged. The elite players felt that not enough was being done in business terms by the BDO to encourage new sponsors into their sport and television coverage should be greater than just one event per year. Lowe stated that the players became disgruntled and demanded they be heard by the BDO, so a players' association was formed, named the Professional Darts Players Association (PDPA). However, the BDO, led by founder and CEO, Olly Croft, would not listen to the players through the association. Lowe believed that the players' involvement in helping the game progress was seen as a threat to the BDO's control of the sport.[109]

The 1990s: The 'split' in darts

As darts entered the 1990s, with only one tournament on television, it was evident that the prize money in the game was not keeping pace with rival sports that were broadcast on the BBC, such as the World Snooker Championship. After over five years of internal pressure from the PDPA for change in the way the sport was being governed and the way in which the players were being supported (which had ultimately failed), 16 professional players, including every previous BDO Embassy World Professional Darts Champion who was still active in the game, players' managers and representatives of the darts industry (such as Unicorn Products Ltd) worked together to construct an alternative darts organisation ostensibly for professional players, originally named the World Darts Council (WDC), in January 1992.[110] Tommy Cox, who was the manager of some of the darts players including multiple world champions Jocky Wilson and Phil Taylor at this time, stated that the majority of the top players could not survive financially as 'professionals' by the early 1990s. Cox outlined the significant connection between the game and the alcoholic breweries: the players were still performing exhibitions in the pub

at the breweries, but the appearances in pubs were aided by the television coverage, and therefore, without the exposure, their appearances diminished, linked to Deller's statement previously. The players believed that darts as a professional game was dying.[111] Tensions came to boil at the 1993 BDO Embassy World Professional Darts Championship, in what is heralded as the commencement of the split in darts. According to Bristow, with only one televised tournament to play for the players had decided enough was enough. Sky Sports had expressed an interest in running a tournament with the players, which would generate exposure and income, so they felt that it was time to confront the BDO and ask them what was going on.[112] Bristow went to a meeting with Croft the day before the 1993 tournament was due to start, and asked three questions on behalf of the players:

> **Eric Bristow**: 'Ollie, can you give us more than one tournament a year on TV?'
>
> **Olly Croft**: 'No'
>
> **Bristow**: 'OK, would you mind if we ran our own tournaments on TV, because our livelihood is being affected here?'
>
> **Croft**: 'Yes, I would mind'
>
> **Bristow**: 'OK, if we did run our own tournaments on television, what would happen?'
>
> **Croft**: 'You'll be banned'.[113]

Waddell thought that the dialogue in this meeting between Bristow and Croft graphically symbolised the oppressive attitude of the BDO leader (Croft) in the late 1980s and 1990s.[114] Essentially, the *split in darts* refers to an acrimonious dispute between top professional darts players and the game's governing body, the BDO. On 7 January 1993, the 16 WDC players released a statement saying that they would only participate in the 1994 BDO Embassy World Professional Darts Championship if it came under the auspices of the WDC, and that they only recognised the WDC as having the authority to sanction their participation in darts tournaments worldwide. Two weeks after the 1993 Embassy World Championship ended, the BDO responded by suspending the 16 (which became 14 when Mike Gregory and Chris Johns rejoined the BDO) 'rebel' players from participating in all of the BDO tournaments in the United Kingdom.[115] However, following a meeting in London in late April 1993, the BDO turned the suspension of the WDC players from playing in any tournaments in the UK, into a

full ban on the WDC players from being able to play any BDO-sanctioned darts, even down to county level. The BDO also passed a motion which said that any BDO players who participated in exhibition events with WDC players would also be banned from the BDO.

Waddell termed the legal battle a 'straight fight between democracy and autocracy'.[116] He thought that Olly Croft and the BDO organisation wanted a complete monopoly on the game and would say anything to justify their stance.[117] The upscaling of the suspension effectively stopped the fourteen WDC players from earning a living from the game, thus stopping them being professionals. The actual notion of stopping the players playing led to legal proceedings commencing in the English High Court. Waddell believed that it was not about pride, loyalty or money that the WDC took the BDO to the High Court; it was about the players being denied the right to ply their trade or feed their family, which he believed were the basic elements of being a professional sportsperson, [118] which links to Beech and Chadwick's definition of professionalisation being able to play a sport as a full-time job and the fundamentals of working life. The five-year legal battle between the two governing bodies resulted in a 'Tomlin order' in June 1997, which meant that the BDO had to lift the ban on the players and associates from competing at darts competitions locally and globally. The Tomlin order established the freedom of darts players, giving them the choice of which organisation they wished to play for. The WDC recognised the World Darts Federation as the governing body of world darts, the BDO as the governing body of UK darts, and the WDC renamed themselves as the Professional Darts Corporation (PDC).

The Future: The BDO and the PDC

Reflecting on the split in darts, many of the players and personnel, including agents and managers such as Cox and Dick Allix, believed that by the 1990s Croft's ability and thinking in the running of the game of darts had become stale. In business terms, Cox and many of the players stated that Croft was against bringing any marketing, specialised TV personnel, or PR experts, and said that Croft thought PR was a waste of money. Cox thought that Croft treated darts like his own crown jewel, and would not embrace changes to how a game such as darts at the time needed to be marketed in a leisure society to survive. Croft was contrite in his response to these claims, arguing that as he had been there from the 'start' and had seen the game grow from the 1970s, he felt it was like his 'baby', and did not want the

sport to be organised by anyone else or with any interference.[119] When commenting on the split in darts and the BDO's stance at the time, Leighton Rees argued that it was not the first time the BDO had backed the players into a corner, outlining how the BDO had 'got rid' of the NDAGB by making darts players choose whether to play BDO or NDAGB tournaments, which ultimately led to the dissolution of the NDAGB in the late 1970s.[120] The BDO's strive towards professionalism from the players and the professionalisation of the game of darts as a whole was seen as the catalyst for darts widened appeal in the 1970s and 1980s. It was rather prophetic of how the BDO would not embrace the players need for progression to remain professional, and, similar to the NDAGB in the 1970s, ended up being overtaken by a new organisation (the PDC) in the late 2000s, which once again forced the BDO to try and restrict the players choice of who they could play for.

Waddell thought the BDO should have been more democratic and taken more notice of the genuine concerns of the professional players. He thought the WDC were an excellent organisation and were doing well at finding new sponsors.[121] Lowe stated that all the players wanted the BDO to carry on as the overall administrators of the sport, and that all the players wanted was a say in the formats of the tournaments, the prize funding and the presentation of the game to help it maintain its status.[122] Rees believed that the players went through the proper channels to try and encourage the progression of the game to a sport, and that while the BDO had achieved a good job in getting darts to its position at the time, many of the players believed that it was time to move on and allow different promoters with different ideas to move the game forward for the good of professionals and amateurs alike.[123] It is here that Shilbury and Ferkins' definition of professionalisation, 'the transition from an amateur, volunteer-driven pastime to a business-like sector' is very prescient in how the players wanted change in the governance of the sport, which they thought was autocratic but with an amateur outlook, run by very few personnel, and needed a more professional, business based focus to help maintain their status as professional dart players in a changing society.[124] Dowling et. al's understanding of professionalisation being the process by which sport organisations, systems, and the occupation of sport, transforms from a volunteer driven to an increasingly business-like phenomenon is very apt for the sport of darts in how

the select group of elite players believed that to maintain their professional status, the organisation and systems required radical adjustment in a changing society.

The managing director of the darts manufacturer Unicorn, Edward Lowy, thought the difference between the two governing bodies was all about one group of people (the PDC) wanting to offer opportunities to players and potential players, and believed that the BDO had the mentality that 'they wanted to be a closed shop, in control of everything and were effectively in the business of slamming doors shut, whereas the players and management of the PDC were in the business of trying to open doors'.[125] On reflection, Chaplin believed that the PDC served the interests of the professionals and has successfully promoted the game, increasing darts' coverage on satellite television and creating new 'names' such as Phil 'The Power' Taylor.[126] When concluding his publication, as a nod towards the transformation of darts in the late twentieth century, Chaplin stated that the PDC represented the professional darts player, whilst the BDO continued to support the grass roots of the game, run the county league championships and encourage young people to enter the sport.[127]

According to Blackshaw, in the late twentieth century, sporting organisations recognised that like any business, 'they need to get noticed and this means that they must assert their identities in the most efficient ways that they have at their disposal'.[128] This was true of the PDC in the 1990s - the players and their associated personnel believed that for darts to survive, they would have to formulate their own concept of the sport, which could be sold and consumed by the audience both via TV in the home, and at the live darts venue. The PDC, with the support of broadcasters such as Sky Sports, sold this as a live carnival event that fans would want to consume and create a seductive atmosphere, which would hopefully entice television viewers into attending 'live' darts events. Attracting a larger fan base through a sporting spectacle would in turn become attractive to broadcasters (such as Sky Sports) and a multitude of prospective sponsors, who would embrace darts once again, and with the BDO's dossier and campaign to recognise the game as a sport highlighting the fact that players walk over 16 miles per tournament, helped the game gain its official recognition as a sport in March 2005 by the UK sports councils.[129]

Conclusion

This article has examined the transformation of darts from a leisurely game to a professional sport between the 1970s and the 1990s. The change was enabled by the creation of the British Darts Organisation (BDO) and the introduction of television broadcasting, which together fed a continual process of professionalisation. Via interviews, documentaries and archival information, this article has analysed some of the reasons behind the *split in darts*, shedding light on how the BDO did not successfully manage the transformation into two governing bodies in the late 1990s. Focusing on the professionalisation of darts between 1970 and 1997, it is clear that the medium of television, primarily supported by the governance and drive of the BDO, were the major factors in darts' transformation and rise to its second peak in popularity during the late twentieth century in the United Kingdom. This helped to popularise darts as a sport in the UK and northern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s. This article has offered an understanding of the transformation of darts in the late twentieth century from the players and governance based perspectives.

The consensus from the majority of top-ranked darts players and personnel connected to the sport was that in the late 1980s and early 1990s, inadequate and restrictive governance from the BDO led to a reduction in tournaments and diminished television exposure. Therefore, the players could not continue to pursue the sport of darts as full-time professionals without tournament revenue and the television exposure that lead to exhibition work, which also generated the older professional players' significant income. The findings appear to suggest that the BDO became too autocratic to progress the game of darts in the postmodern 1990s, with many other sports in the UK (particularly Association Football, Rugby League, Rugby Union) embracing the concepts of PR, marketing, advertisement, sponsorship and television to advance their sport. Many of these concepts have enabled the sports stated above to truly become professional, allowing them to generate increasing revenue, which is largely due to the inception of television in the mid-twentieth century. The disillusioned players believed that by setting up their own organisation (the PDC), and by having an equal share in the way the sport could be aesthetically presented and marketed to the sporting world, they could propel darts back to the epicentre of popular sporting culture. In turn, this would help them maintain their professional status, essentially

by turning the game into a sport with the help of the PDC and the corporations' business-like governance.

Beech and Chadwick's definition of professionalisation occurring when 'elite players are able to play sport as a full-time job' is a rather simplistic form of professionalisation for a darts player, but highlights the basic need for why the split had to occur in terms of the players being able to continue playing the sport as a full-time job.[130] However, it ignores the wider professionalisation of the game itself; it focuses on the individual rather than the administration of the game, how darts was managed and the presentation of the game at the time. However, for the top darts players, being able to play the game as a full-time job was a key reason for them feeling the need to break-away from the BDO in the early 1990s to form the WDC in 1992 (being renamed the PDC in 1997 after the courts decision of the Tomlin Order). The economic situation in BDO darts had become so calamitous following the broadcasters drastically reduced output of televised darts, that the players could not make a living, and therefore could not function as 'professionals'. Shilbury and Ferkins' definition of professionalisation, as 'the transition from an amateur, volunteer driven pastime to a more business like sector' was very significant in the development of darts in the late twentieth century, and is the reason why there are two recognised organisations today, the BDO, and the PDC. Similar to the sport of Boxing, both darts governing bodies versions of the world titles are recognised by each other but one (the PDC version) is more heralded in terms of the standard of the players (scoring averages being significantly higher in the PDC) and the BDO is seen as the traditional but more amateur title.

In regards to the limitations of this article, primarily, is that whilst there is detailed empirical evidence included, it perhaps needed more of a theoretical underpinning. Secondly, the sources of material used in this article largely derives from sports studies and sports insiders: there could have been further engagement with secondary literature from historians, more content from the Darts World magazine, which has been in circulation since December 1972 and charts much of those early days of darts' rise to become a national and international sport, and more detailed input regarding British identity and masculinity, which, although this was discussed, could be a primary focus within future studies on British Darts in this period. It was also highlighted from the outset of Chaplin's study that his work

regarding the origins of darts is purely thought based, and that the main chapter regarding the origins 'takes the form of a rehearsal of possibilities'.[131] This is underlined when Chaplin begins by arguing that 'no one has written authoratively about darts origins' and argues that 'there are few certainties about the origins of the game of darts',[132] meaning that the understanding of the formation of darts in Britain could be contested. It could be stated that this article included only fleeting references to how other British sports transformed in this period: however, including these in depth alongside darts would have altered the focus of the article towards a comparative analysis, taking the narrative away from the professionalisation of the sport of darts.

This article has chronicled the development of darts in the late twentieth century, highlighting the importance of professionalisation as a concept for transformation in sports. Giulianotti believes that Ritzer's McDonaldization thesis identifies a deep rationalization process within modern routines of production and consumption that invites application to sport, and needs to be explored in more detail in order to understand the progression of the PDC version of darts in the twenty-first century.[133] The nous and guidance of PDC Chairman Barry Hearn and progressive CEO Matthew Porter, (ably supported by broadcasters such as Sky Sports since the inception of the PDC) have marketed the PDC version of darts towards a business-like sport since the turn of the millennium: the performative, globalising spectacle of darts, is purveyed predominantly through the televised PDC events, whereas the traditional or amateur style of darts is found in the BDO events, namely the BDO Lakeside World Professional Darts Championship at the Surrey venue. There are a variety of reasons for the sustained success of PDC darts since the turn of the millennium, which could be analysed in future research into how the processes of the PDC version of the sport has seen its quality of sporting play increase and its revenues and profits increase tenfold against the BDO competitions, to an extent by which Hearn and the PDC attempted a takeover of the BDO to merge the BDO under the PDC's governance in 2009.[134] This discussion has demonstrated that there is ample historical evidence about the transformation of darts from a pub game to a sporting spectacle which paved the way for the metamorphosis of darts in the 21st century. Akin to many other sports, it is clear that television is the direct link to many other aspects of how darts has progressed from a public house game to a globalising sport, familiar to millions in the

present day. Following this article, it is evident that further analysis of darts as a sport in the twenty-first century is required to understand its place in contemporary British sporting culture.

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